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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study examined gender differences in writing in the essays of five male and five female freshman composition students. The findings suggest parallels between the writing and speaking behaviors of men and women students and between student writing and the work of male and female professional writers. The male students made few references to women and often wrote on typically "male" topics: gun control, nuclear power, or cars. In contrast, the women revealed worlds in which men were definitely present but they often expressed contradictory attitudes toward both men and traditional sex roles. The women described a more complicated reality than the men in that their conflicts resulted not only from their inexperience but also from their gender conditioning. Their settings were more frequently interior spaces, and their action was less assertive than that of men. Women frequently described accommodation to the environment rather than rebellion against it. This emphasis upon accommodation, forbearance, and caution was, no doubt, a result of the women's intuition that they were not to inherit the world they inhabited. There was evidence in the women's essays, though, of a desire for achievements of a kind not traditionally available to females. This tension between submission and a longing for assertion sometimes produced inconsistencies and ambiguities. As a result of their differing experiences and circumstances, men and women appeared to confront different problems in and adopt different attitudes toward their writings. (HTH)

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Gender Difference and Student Writing

Although a considerable amount of work has been done on the relationship between gender and language, most of the research focuses upon speaking rather than reading or writing. Studies suggest, for instance, that women are hesitant and passive in speech situations. Robin Lakoff found that women's speech is characterized by the use of modals and hedges and other syntactic devices used to express uncertainty.[1] She calls women's style "deferential" and accounts for it as "an attempt to achieve and maintain non-responsibility, an unwillingness to take responsibility for one's actions and for the events of one's life."[2] Pamela Fishman, in her study of conversations between men and women, found that women have difficulty asserting themselves in conversations with their spouses. Although they raise many more topics than do men, those topics often fail because the men don't work interactionally to develop them. Women, though, usually help develop topics raised by men.[3]

Studies of the relationship between gender and writing have arisen primarily from feminist literary critics and scholars who examine the writing of professionals, usually novelists or poets. Mary Hiatt in The Way Women Write[4] found, in examining the fiction and non-fiction of published writers (50 women and 50 men), that women's writing is more conservative, less "extreme" and less verbose than that of men (p. 122). Women more often employ a moderate tone and offer reasons and justifications for their arguments. In contrast, men more frequently offer exemplification and conclusions.

Hiatt also found that women's views of themselves, as expressed in their

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choice of metaphors, indicate considerable ambivalence and conflict whereas they view men as "monsters or monkeys, brutes or fools" (p. 128). The men, however, predominantly view women as children or failed adults while viewing themselves as harmless and aging animals (p. 128). She found, too, that men exhibit an emotional detachment in their writing, especially in their choice of adverbs (p. 129), a detachment not evident in the women's writing, and that men's fiction expresses a distinct concern with action whereas the women seem to be more concerned with emotion (p. 131). According to Hiatt, women's comparatively high use of the word "really" suggests that they are afflicted by doubts as to their credibility (p. 132).

Literary criticism and scholarship in women's studies is largely descriptive rather than empirical. Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers, for instance, document that women have written within an identifiable literary tradition, one that exists independent of the dominant male tradition.[5] Numerous scholars have explored the ways in which women's and men's literary forms differ. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the historical categories that we use to define the canon are inappropriate in studying women's literature since women's periods of productivity differ from those of men.[6]

One of the most important examinations of women's literary tradition is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic.[7] The title of the book suggests that women's literature is suffused with themes of madness, covert action, suppressed anger. Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre becomes an emblem of women's imprisonment and seething rage.

Although research on women's speech patterns and on women's literary texts continues to proliferate, we know surprisingly little about the ways in which non-professional women read or write. Very little work has been done on

the relationship between gender and the writing strategies employed by college students in their expository and argumentative essays. A few impressionistic studies do exist. John Ruskiewicz, for instance, argues that, especially in essays written on the high school level, girls "gush" and boys "bore." Girls are overly emotional and boys are overly technical and detailed.[8]

The study I will report on was designed as a preliminary attempt to answer questions about gender differences or similarities in the writing of college freshmen. I conceive of it as an exploratory study, one I hope to expand upon. I examined the essays of five women and five men who were students in my freshman composition class this past fall quarter. I looked closely at the drafts and revisions of a narrative essay, an explanatory essay, and an argumentative essay. Students were free to select their own topics, and they received feedback on drafts in peer-critiquing sessions. The five women were the only women in the class--not an unusual situation at Michigan Tech where the ratio of men to women is approximately three to one. The men were selected somewhat arbitrarily, although I was careful to insure that the grades the two groups received for the course were roughly equivalent.

My findings, although tentative, suggest that there are some parallels between writing behaviors of men and women students and their speaking behaviors and between student writing and the writing of male and female professional writers. The male students seemed to inhabit a world uncomplicated by female presence--very few made reference to women. And often their topics were typically "male": gun control, nuclear power, cars. Many described experiences involving active exploration, learning that resulted from encounters with new environments, or rebellion against authority. The women, in contrast, inhabited worlds in which men were definitely present, but

they often expressed contradictory attitudes toward the men they described or toward traditional sex roles. The topics they selected were also typically "female": discussions of personal interaction, descriptions of clothing. The women's essays often revealed accommodation to the status quo, or frustration unrelieved by confrontation or overt expression of anger.

The one male student who described a woman in detail did so in a derogatory way. Joy, his boss at Burger King, could not spell and was "about five feet nothing, and she was slightly overweight. Not only was she unattractive, she had a personality to match." Another male student made a brief reference to the "beautiful nurses" who made his hospital stay more pleasant. Otherwise, the men made references to other men in defining ambition, in discussing adolescent rebellion, in describing memorable experiences. Their conflicts seemed to result from their age rather than their gender, and often the results of those conflicts affirmed their ability to overcome obstacles, to defy authority, or to assert themselves. One male student, for example, described the deplorable working conditions of his first job and his attempts to join together with other employees to protest the unsafe environment. His assertiveness resulted in his being fired. Another male student described his decision to go against the wishes of his father and quit the swim team. Another discussed the stagnation of small-town life but made it clear that he had escaped being stifled by the environment because he had traveled widely. Another male student focused directly on the liberating effects of travel. In another paper he described his first solo flight in an airplane. The essays of the male students revealed activity, aggression, adventure.

The reality described in the essays of the women, in contrast, seemed more complicated than that of the men in that their conflicts resulted not

only from their inexperience, but also from their gender conditioning. The women most frequently set their descriptions in interior spaces such as dorm rooms, enclosed shopping malls, homes. When they did describe experiences in which they ventured forth, they described action that was less assertive or less productive than did the men. One student described a pleasant Sunday afternoon in which she and several of her friends took a ride in a balloon--a contrast to the experience of the male student who flew an airplane by himself for the first time. A woman student who described the trip to Chicago that she and other members of her honor society took focused not upon the liberating effects of the external stimuli but upon her discovery that her advisor was a nice guy. A woman student who described her class trip to Germany focused on the "frightening" experience of getting on the wrong train. All would have been lost had not the only male in their group, who was described as the "smartest" of them all, come to the rescue by making use of his German.

The women frequently described accommodation to the environment rather than rebellion against it. One student argued that dorm life is conducive to conflict but it does teach us "to deal with our problems, and in turn this helps build character for our future lives. We then have fewer problems in learning to accept people as they are and fitting in in different environments." Another argued that living in a dorm is preferable to living in an apartment because it is more conducive to developing friendships. She depicted a situation which seemed almost utopian: in dorms women help each other with their problems.

When the women described environments that were intolerable, they usually described reactions of forbearance rather than assertion of self. One women student, in recounting the unbearable working conditions at Burger Chef, said,

"I don't think I could ever tell you how many times I felt rebellious or how I resented that place. There were many times that I felt like quitting. It actually got to the point where I dreaded going to work." But this student never did rebel. When the frustration became too intense she took the week off rather than confronting her boss. Later, she resorted to giving away her shifts. She concluded, "Sometimes I wondered if they ever got the message that I really didn't want to be there. Many times I wondered why I was staying there; I guess the only reason was that it was a job and jobs were very hard to come by. I never would have been able to get anything else, so I stayed unwillingly."

The women's essays, for the most part, celebrated moderation, caution. A student who compared the styles of women's dress on two different campuses (and who began by comparing changing fashions to changing automobile models) concluded that she prefers the campus where there is less variety and therefore less pressure to impress others. The student who doesn't "stand out in a crowd" is preferred over a student who wears "bizarre" clothing and "loves to try something new" and "doesn't seem to care what other people will think."

This emphasis upon accommodation, forbearance, and caution was no doubt a result of the women's intuition that they were not to inherit the world they inhabited. There is also evidence in the women's essays, though, of a desire for achievements of a kind not traditionally available to women. This tension between submission and a longing for assertion sometimes produced inconsistencies and ambiguities in the women's papers. One woman student, for instance, in describing people at a shopping mall, contrasted a sloppily-dressed young man and a well-dressed career woman. The woman, who was dressed in a "gray business suit made of wool," clearly represented a kind of role

model for the student--an image of a woman who had achieved success. This woman, who was carrying The Wall Street Journal, "walked with an air of authority leaving one with the impression she held a high position in the business world." There is the suggestion, though, that the woman had to become manlike in order to succeed. The student described her as looking "as immaculate as a soldier waiting for inspection." The paper, in other words, while appearing to attack certain forms of male behavior, namely slovenliness and inattention to appearances, and to celebrate women's accomplishments, in actuality ends up implicitly defending traditional roles and values. If women are to succeed, they must become men. Interestingly, this student frequently came to class attired in a well-pressed Air Force ROTC uniform. This same student, though, also wrote the paper arguing that dorms are conducive to female friendships. Her reality contains at once a vision of female community and nurturance and conformity to male values and behavior patterns.

Another student exhibited similar inconsistencies. In one of her papers she discussed the dangers of dependency in marriage. She argued that both women and men suffer if they allow themselves to become overly dependent upon their spouse because they will have difficulty coping once that spouse dies. The paper reveals an awareness of the inadequacies of traditional sex roles and implies that men should learn domestic skills and women should achieve a degree of independence in marriage. In another paper, though, this same student defined ambition by using negative examples of three undesirable extremes, all of which were illustrated by examples of women she knew. One had no ambition, another had hardly any, and a third had too much. The person with just the right amount of ambition was, significantly, a male, her boyfriend. Once again we see an awareness of the limitations of traditional patterns as well as an acceptance of male superiority.

A third student also appeared to be caught up in the contradictions inherent in a society in which sex roles are changing. Her first essay was a wonderfully humorous description of the ways in which she and a girlfriend covertly subverted the authority of her boss at A&W. They would eat food they had been forbidden to eat. On the last day of the job they went all out. Not only did they themselves have an orgy, they also invited their friends to participate in the revelry. This was hardly the equivalent of the direct confrontation with bosses described by some of the male students, but it was certainly the strongest expression of female assertion of self in the papers I received from the women students. This same student, though, wrote a paper in which she defined ambition in a somewhat incongruous way. She provided examples of two women and one man. The women, Mother Theresa of Calcutta and a woman who was paralyzed from the neck down, are examples of female forbearance and sacrifice. Her third example, though, was Andrew Carnegie, whom she describes as having "capitalized on his opportunities and reached his goal of wealth in extreme." These are inconsistent images to say the least: a nurturer who is a "prime example of dedication and achievement used unselfishly" and a paralyzed woman who "rebounded to learn the art of drawing using only her mouth." This student valorizes both female resignation and male greed.

The papers I have examined suggest that when male and female students sit down to write a theme for their composition classes, they have significantly different problems to confront. The men's writing reflects their more privileged position in society, their wider range of experiences, and their less conflicted aspirations. The women's writing, on the other hand, reflects the contradictions they experience in their attempts to succeed in a male-dominated world. It was my impression that, as a result of their differing

circumstances, the men and women adopted different attitudes toward their writing. The men wrote more economically and more hastily; usually they located a focus early on and revised by developing it more fully. The women, in contrast, more frequently had greater difficulty finding a focus and often came to see me about their drafts. They tended to revise conceptually.

If these tentative findings are born out by subsequent research, we ought to begin discovering ways of making men more aware of the presence of women in their lives and of the implications of that presence in terms of traditional sex roles. Quite possibly, the men in the sample achieved a greater degree of coherence in their writing than did the women students by ignoring one half of the population. The study suggests, as well, that women cannot write independent of the contradictions they experience daily as members of a disenfranchised group attempting to make it in a man's world. Perhaps the women had greater difficulty achieving focus in their essays because they had greater difficulty minimizing inconsistency and dissonance. But we will probably not have much success making men aware of women's presence or helping women reconcile discordant elements in their experience unless we work to eliminate inequality in society itself.

Notes

[1]See Language and Woman's Place (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

[2]"Women's Language," in Women's Language and Style, eds. Douglas Butturff and Edmund L. Epstein (Akron, Ohio: E. L. Epstein, 1978), p. 149.

[3]"What Do Couples Talk About When They're Alone?" in Women's Language and Style, eds. Butturff and Epstein, p. 21.

[4](New York: Teachers College Press, 1977). Subsequent references are to this edition.

[5]Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton Univ. press, 1977); Ellen Moers, Literary Women: The Great Writers (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

[6]See, for instance, Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in Becoming Visible: Women in European History, ed. Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977), pp. 137-64.

[7]The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979).

[8]"Why Girls Gush and Boys Bore," 1978 Proceedings of Conference of College Teachers of English of Texas, ed. Turner S. Kobler, Vol. 43 (September, 1978), 69-73.